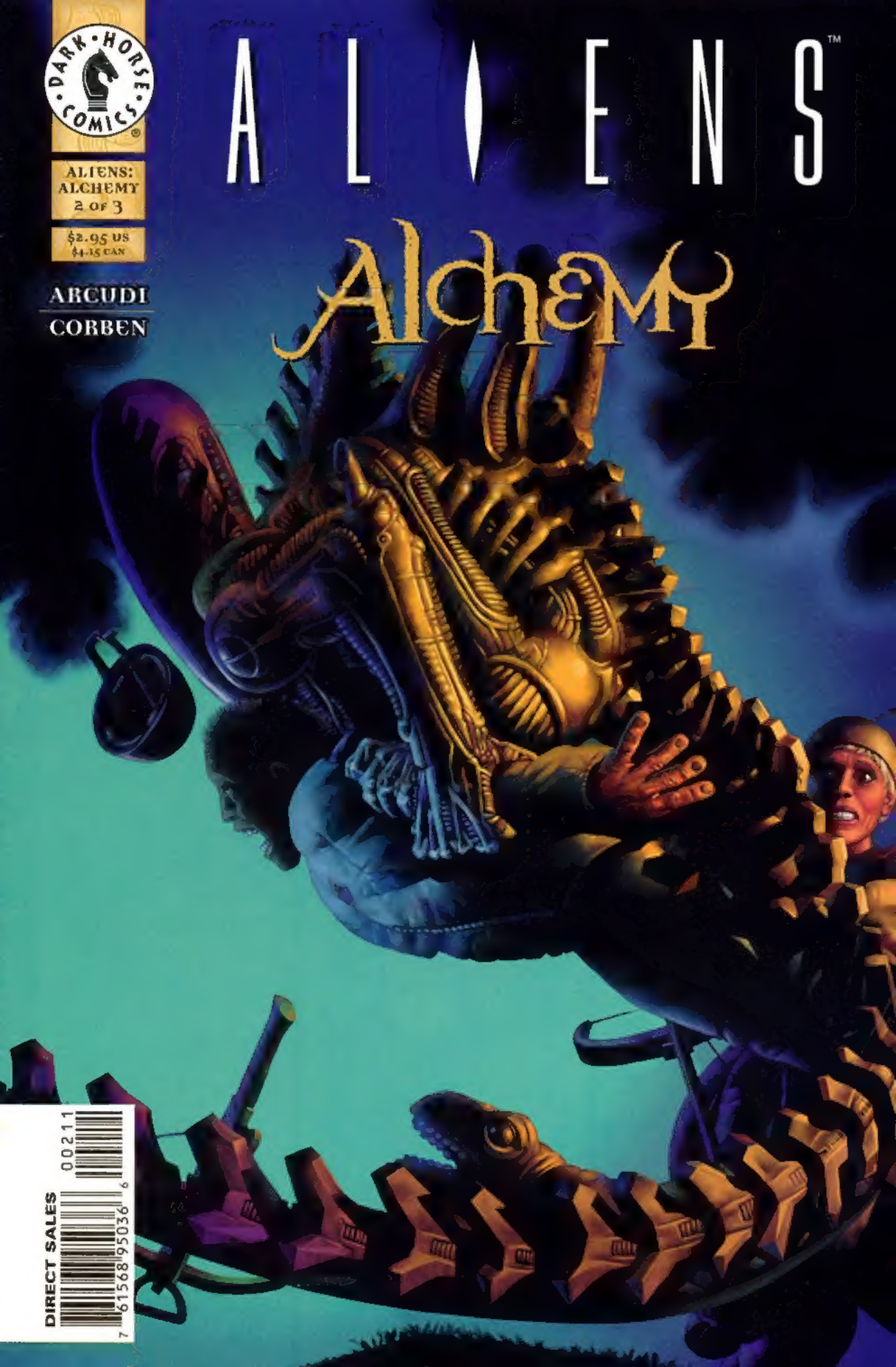
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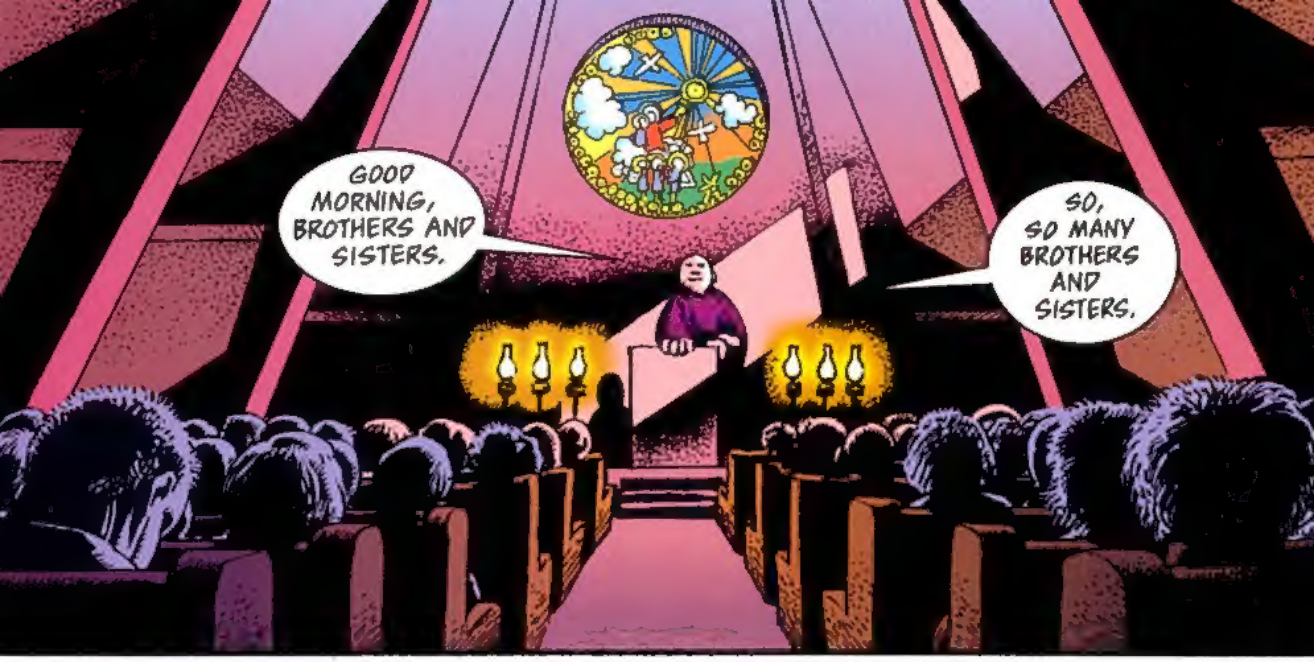
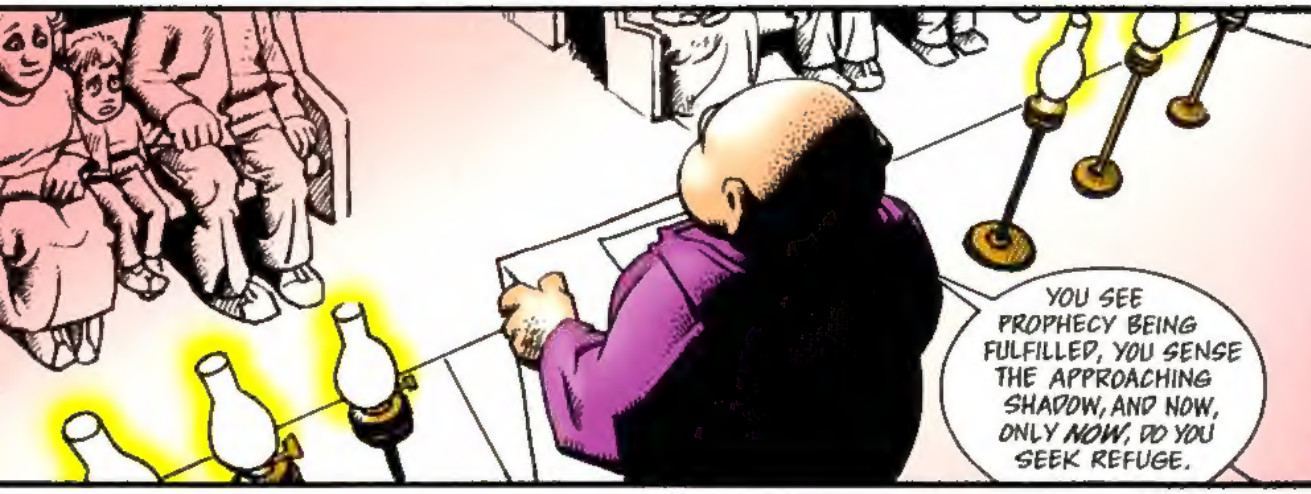
HHHAAALP!
HELP ME, SOMEBODY!
OH, FIRSTFATHER, PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE...


GOOD MORNING, BROTHERS AND SISTERS.
SO, SO MANY BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

I WOULD BE HAPPY TO SAY THAT SUCH A GATHERING OF THE... FAITHFUL LIGHTENS MY BEING.
BUT *SHOULD* I SAY THAT?
WAS IT NOT JUST TWO WEEKS GONE THAT THE WORD OF *FIRST-FATHER* HAD TO SOUND IN THE STREETS TO REACH TRUE BELIEVERS?

HOW MANY DID IT FIND, EVEN *THEN*?
YOU AND I, WE KNOW WHAT GUIDES THE HERD BACK TO THE STABLE, YES?

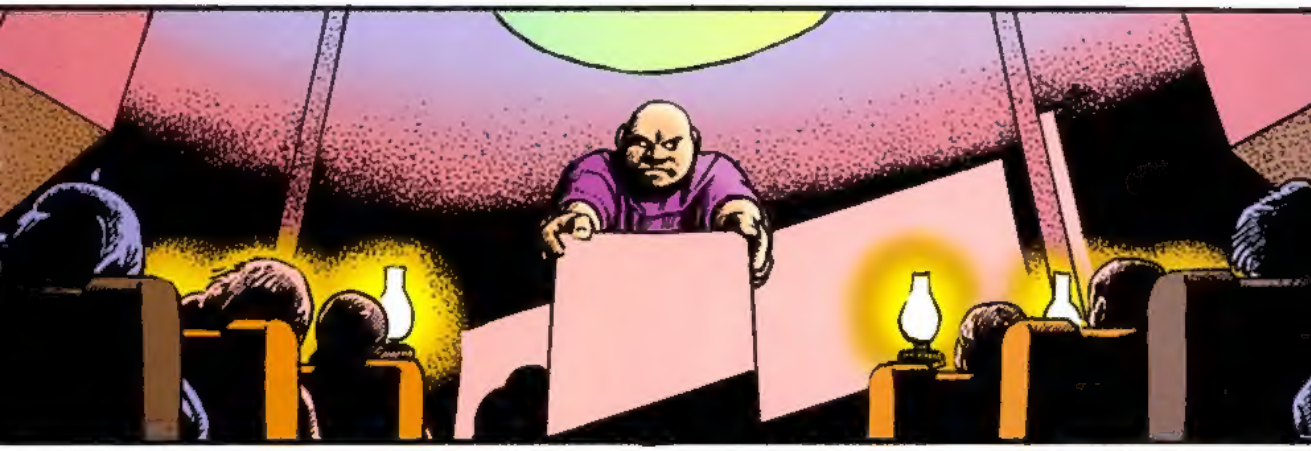
YOU AND I, WE KNOW WHAT'S COMING.


YOU SEE PROPHECY BEING FULFILLED, YOU SENSE THE APPROACHING SHADOW, AND NOW, ONLY NOW, DO YOU SEEK REFUGE.

"DELIVER ME, FIRSTFATHER, DELIVER ME."
"I'LL ATTEND REFUGE EVERY SABBATH, IF YOU'LL ONLY SAVE ME."

THIS IS THE OFFERING YOU MAKE TO FIRST-FATHER?
AN OATH BORN OF FEAR IN EXCHANGE FOR YOUR SALVATION?

CAN YOU TRULY BELIEVE THAT IS SUFFICIENT?



OF COURSE YOU CAN.

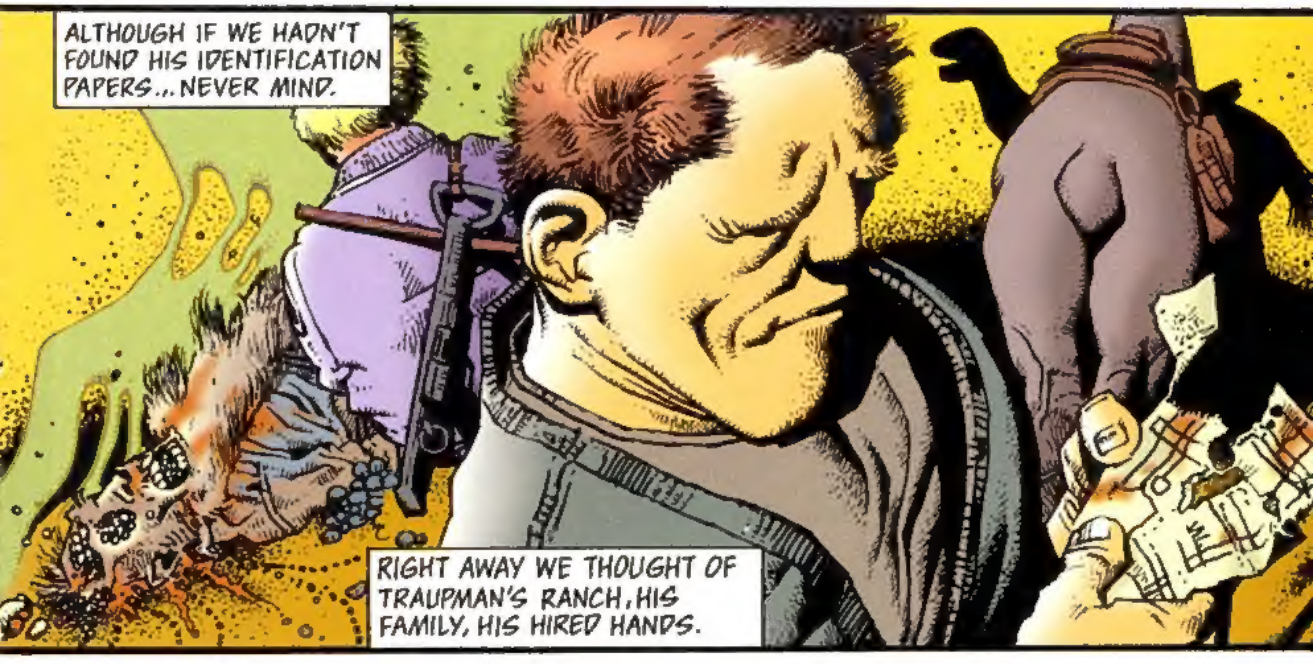
FOR YOU ARE HIS CHILDREN, AND WHEN CHILDREN ARE AFRAID, WHO WILL PROTECT THEM BUT *THEIR* FATHER?

BE NOT ASHAMED OF YOUR FEAR, FOR IT IS A *KIND* OF FAITH. A FAITH IN *THE* WORLD'S ABILITY TO DO YOU HARM.

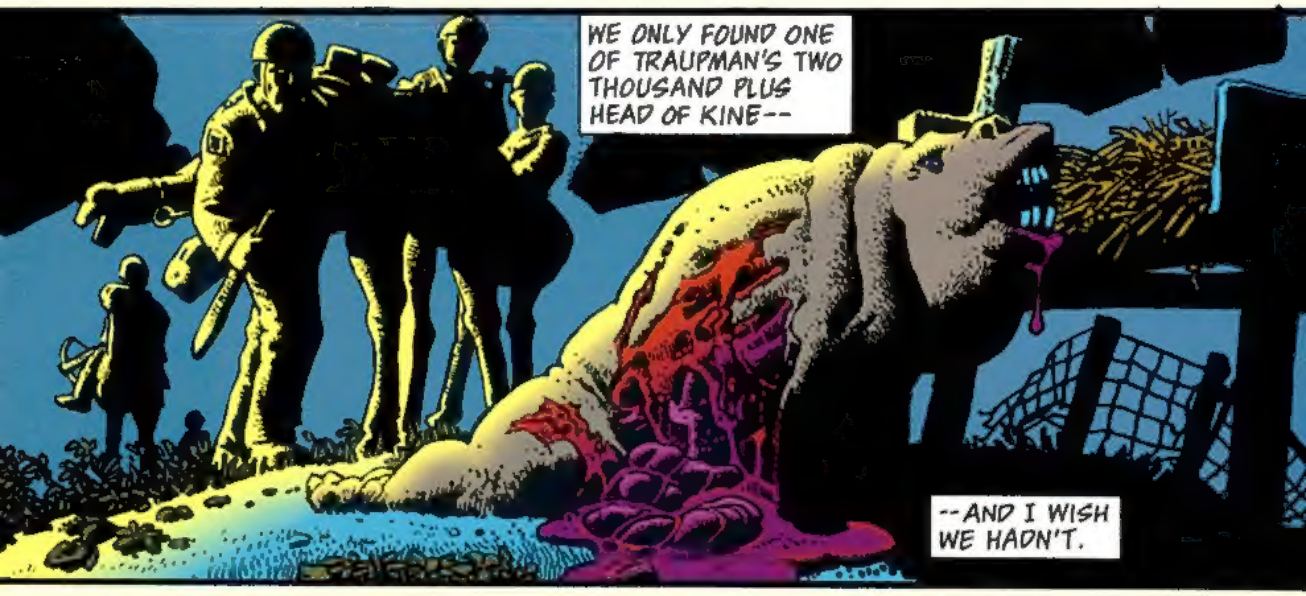
FOR *FIRSTFATHER*, THAT IS ENOUGH.

THAT WAS THE DAY WE FOUND TRAUPMAN.
WHILE LEGATE MUIR WAS TELLING EVERYBODY ABOUT THE END OF THE WORLD--
--CAPTAIN PRICE AND I WERE WATCHING IT.
TWELVE MURDERS IN SEVEN DAYS, MORE THAN EMERSON'S HAD IN A DECADE.

NO, I THINK THAT WAS THE SIXTH DAY. I'M NOT SURE.
BUT ANYWAY, THAT WAS THE DAY WE FOUND TRAUPMAN.


ALTHOUGH IF WE HADN'T FOUND HIS IDENTIFICATION PAPERS... NEVER MIND.
RIGHT AWAY WE THOUGHT OF TRAUPMAN'S RANCH, HIS FAMILY, HIS HIRED HANDS.

WITH FIVE OTHER SECURITY OFFICERS, THE CAPTAIN AND I RODE OUT THERE.
KNOWING WE COULDN'T GET THERE BEFORE NIGHTFALL, WE WANTED TO BE SURE WE WERE PREPARED FOR THE WORST.
THAT'S WHAT WE GOT.


WE ONLY FOUND ONE OF TRAUPMAN'S TWO THOUSAND PLUS HEAD OF KINE--
--AND I WISH WE HADN'T.

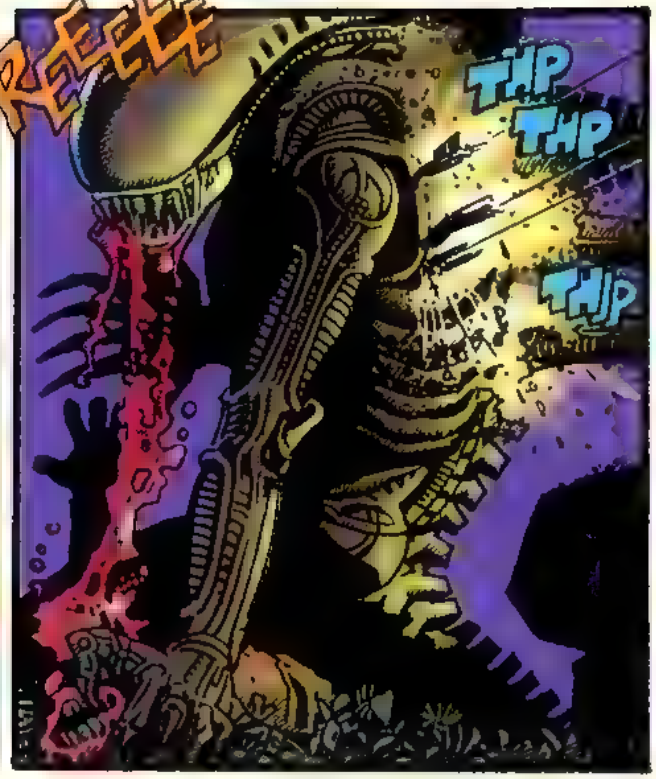
I SHOULD HAVE BEEN ALERT, I SHOULD HAVE BEEN FOCUSED, BUT INSTEAD I REMEMBER THINKING OF SCHOOL, WHEN I WAS LITTLE.
IN FIRST GRADE WE LEARNED ABOUT *THE LAST PLAGUE*. IT ALMOST WIPED OUT EMERSON OVER A HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

MY TEACHER TOLD US PEOPLE DROPPED DEAD IN THE STREETS.
I REMEMBER THINKING, "THIS MUST HAVE BEEN WHAT IT LOOKED LIKE."

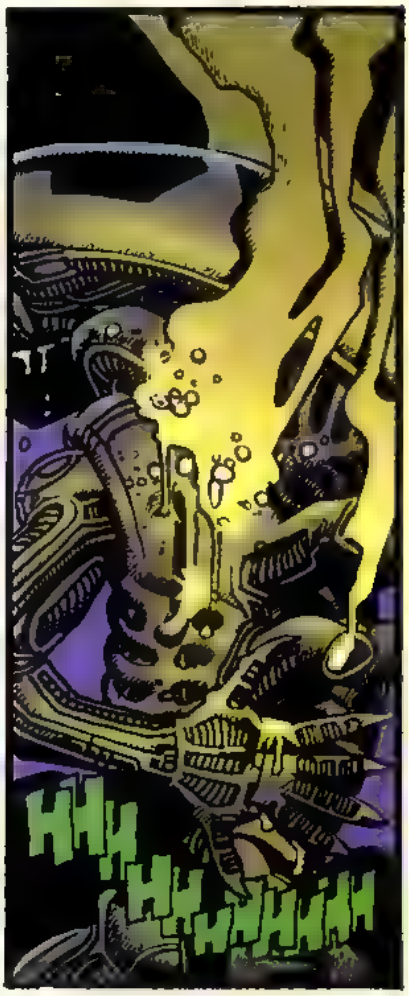
BUT THIS WASN'T A PLAGUE.

SEVEN ARMED OFFICERS, *SEVEN* OF US, AND IT ATTACKED ANYWAY.

"WELL, THAT'S GOOD." I LIED TO MYSELF, "IT'S TOO STUPID TO BE AFRAID. WE CAN SEE IT, AND WE CAN KILL IT.
"WE CAN END THIS NIGHTMARE HERE, NOW."


REEEE
THP
THP
THP

BUT OUR SHAFTS, THEY JUST, JUST MELTED.

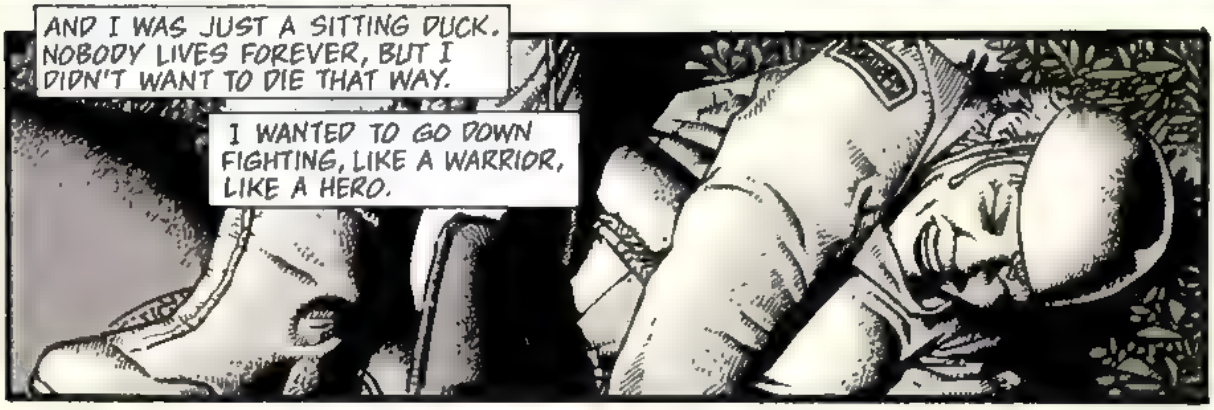

HHH HHHHHHH

CAPTAIN PRICE NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO RE-ARM.

OFFICER INGA, SHE WAS FASTER, SHE WAS READY.
THAT MUST HAVE BEEN WHAT SHE THOUGHT, BUT WHAT HAPPENED NEXT--

THWOMP!

FOR A FEW SECONDS, OR MAYBE IT WAS LONGER, I BLACKED OUT.
WHEN MY HEAD CLEARED--


AND I WAS JUST A SITTING DUCK. NOBODY LIVES FOREVER, BUT I DIDN'T WANT TO DIE THAT WAY.
I WANTED TO GO DOWN FIGHTING, LIKE A WARRIOR, LIKE A HERO.

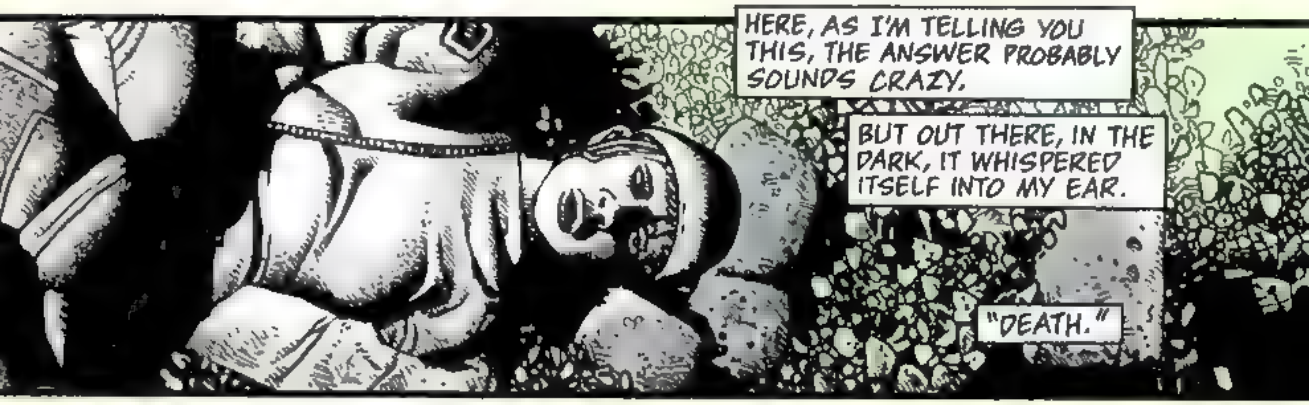
LIKE CAPTAIN PRICE.
DIEDIEDIEDIEDIE!!!!

REEEE
SHWAK!

SSSSSSSSSS
AHHHHH!

SSSSSSSSSS
SPLINCH!

IT WAS MORNING BEFORE ANYONE FOUND ME.
WHEN I STOPPED BEING SCARED, I STARTED TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHAT HAD SAVED MY LIFE.


HERE, AS I'M TELLING YOU THIS, THE ANSWER PROBABLY SOUNDS CRAZY.
BUT OUT THERE, IN THE DARK, IT WHISPERED ITSELF INTO MY EAR.
"DEATH."

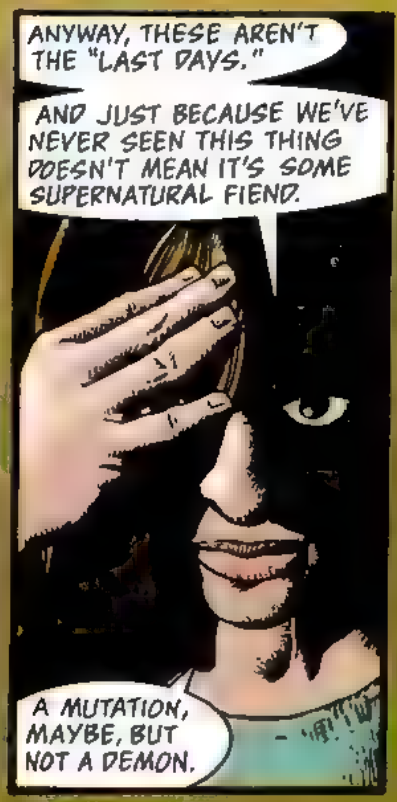
AND IT'S TRUE. MY MOUNT, DEAD, PINNING ME TO THE EARTH, KEEPING FROM FIGHTING A HOPELESS BATTLE--
--AND A TWICE-KILLED POLICE CAPTAIN, THE ONLY ONE OF US WHO COULD HAVE SCARED THAT MONSTER OFF.

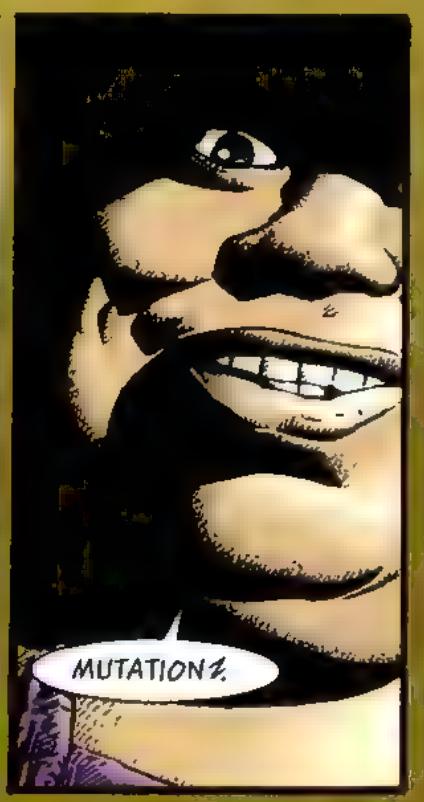
BUT I DON'T SUPPOSE THAT'S THE SORT OF THING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT.

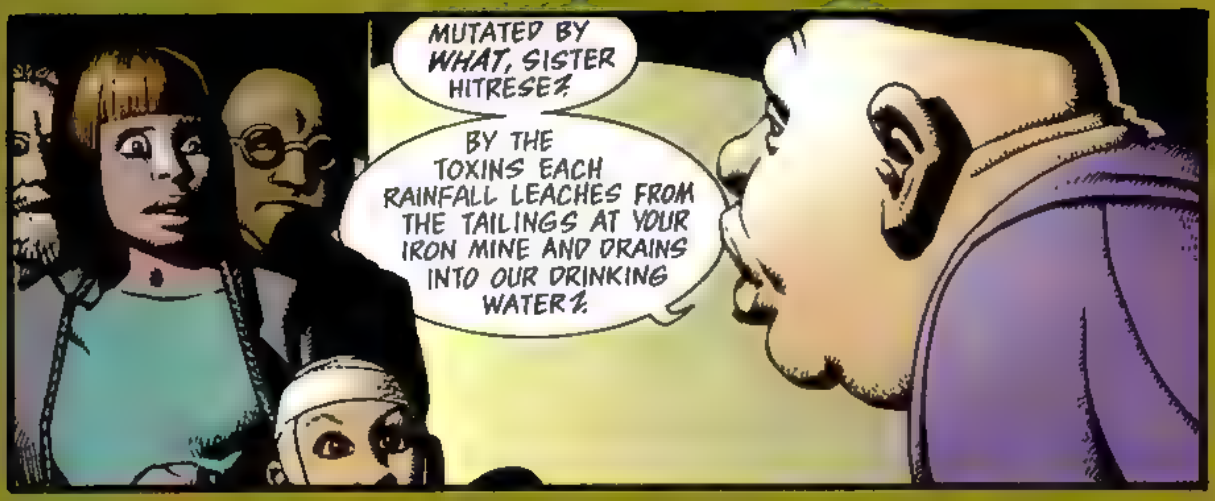
SPEAK ON, SISTER.
SPEAK YOUR MIND. EASE YOUR HEART.

NOW, YOU'RE SURE THIS WASN'T A PLAINS WOLF, SERGEANT NEWCOMEN? OR MAYBE A WHOLE PACK?
WITH ACID FLOWING FROM ITS WOUNDS, SISTER HITRESE?
WE ALL SAW WHAT WAS LEFT OF CAPTAIN PRICE. YOU QUESTION UNWISELY.

AND YOU'RE TALKING OUT OF TURN, LEGATE.
WHEN I HAVE A QUESTION FOR YOU, I'LL LET YOU KNOW.

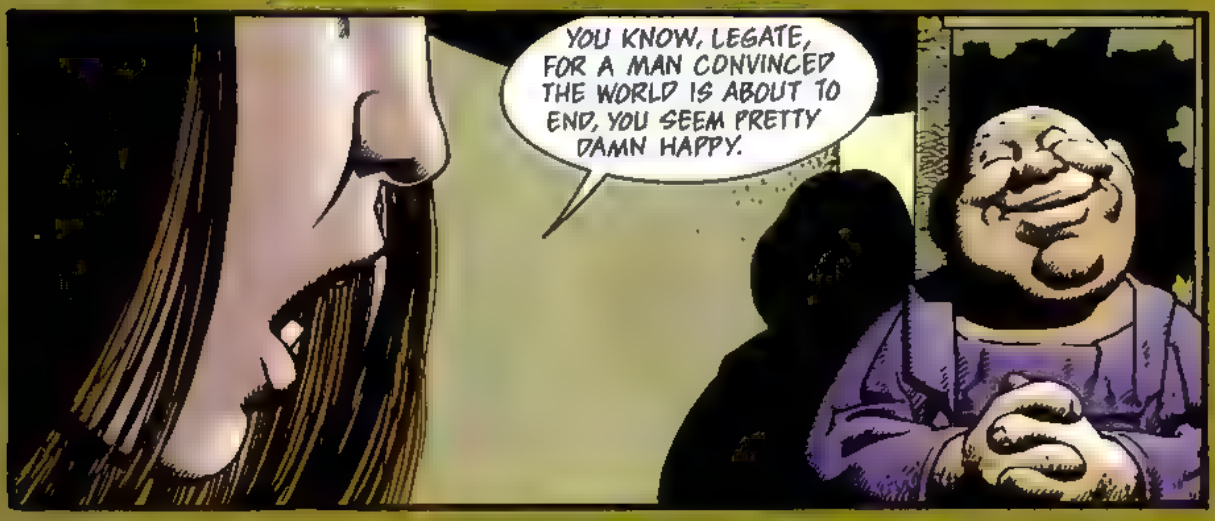

ANYWAY, THESE AREN'T THE "LAST DAYS."
AND JUST BECAUSE WE'VE NEVER SEEN THIS THING DOESN'T MEAN IT'S SOME SUPERNATURAL FIEND.
A MUTATION, MAYBE, BUT NOT A DEMON.


MUTATION?


MUTATED BY WHAT, SISTER HITRESE?
BY THE TOXINS EACH RAINFALL LEACHES FROM THE TAILINGS AT YOUR IRON MINE AND DRAINS INTO OUR DRINKING WATER?

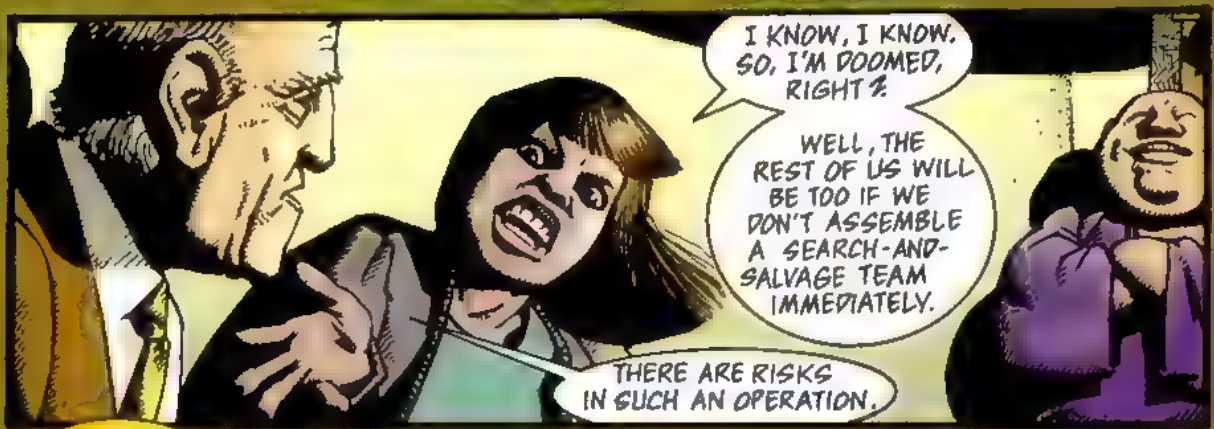
OR MUTATED, PERHAPS, BY THE STRANGLING SMOKE YOUR SMELTERS AND POWER PLANTS PUMP INTO THE AIR?
AND IF WE ARE SEEING ONE MUTATION, SHOULDN'T WE EXPECT MANY MORE?

NO SPECTERS, SISTER. NO DEMONS.
NATURE FIGHTS BACK--THIS WE HAVE BEEN TOLD.


YOU KNOW, LEGATE, FOR A MAN CONVINCED THE WORLD IS ABOUT TO END, YOU SEEM PRETTY DAMN HAPPY.

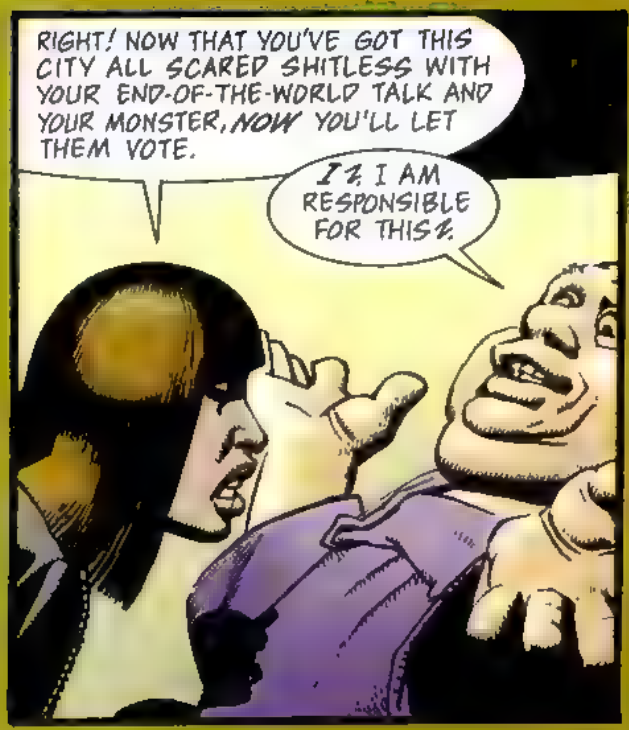
I HAVE ALWAYS FOLLOWED FIRSTFATHER'S TEACHINGS.
I, AND ALL WHO ACCEPT HIM INTO THEIR LIVES, HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR FROM THE WIDENING WAVE OF DEATH.

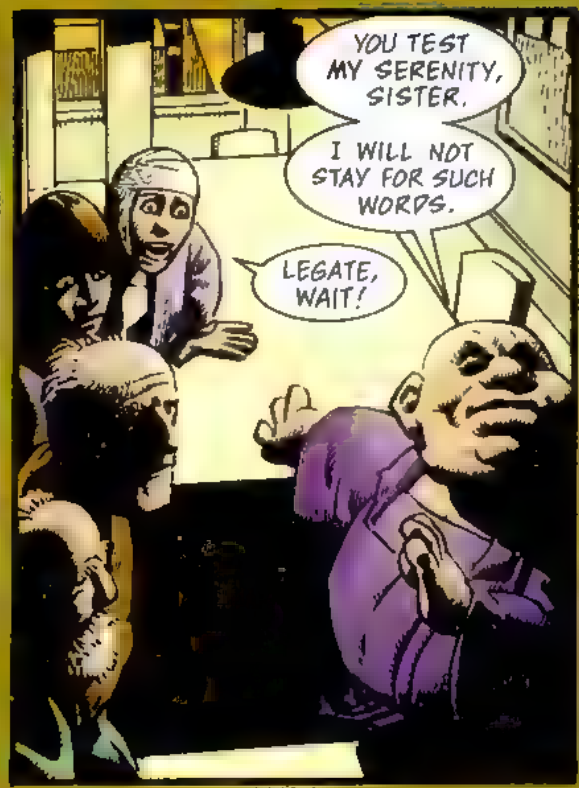
BUT YOU
YOU HAVE NO HUMILITY BEFORE THE VAST FORCES WITH WHICH YOU TAMPER.

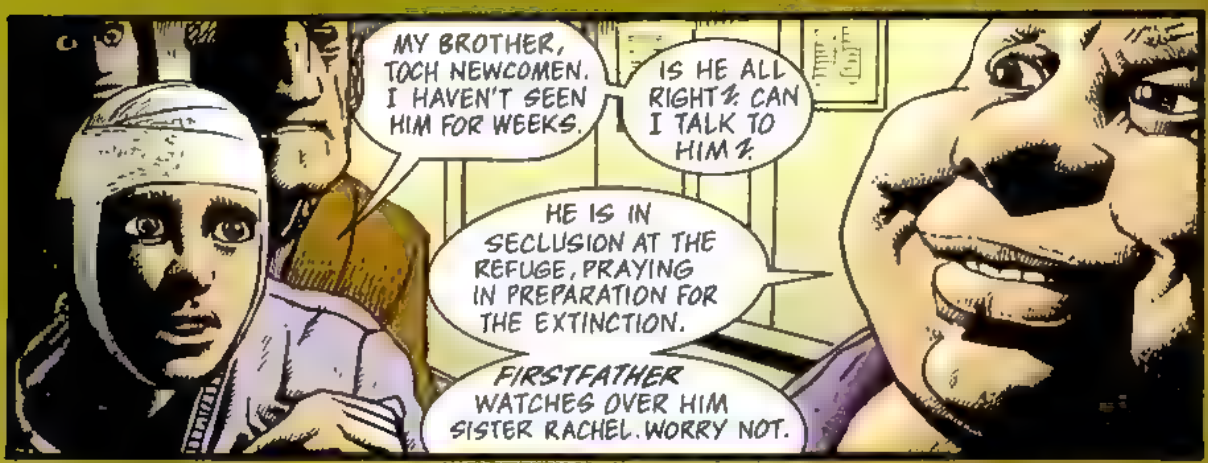

I KNOW, I KNOW. SO, I'M DOOMED, RIGHT?
WELL, THE REST OF US WILL BE TOO IF WE DON'T ASSEMBLE A SEARCH-AND-SALVAGE TEAM IMMEDIATELY.
THERE ARE RISKS IN SUCH AN OPERATION.

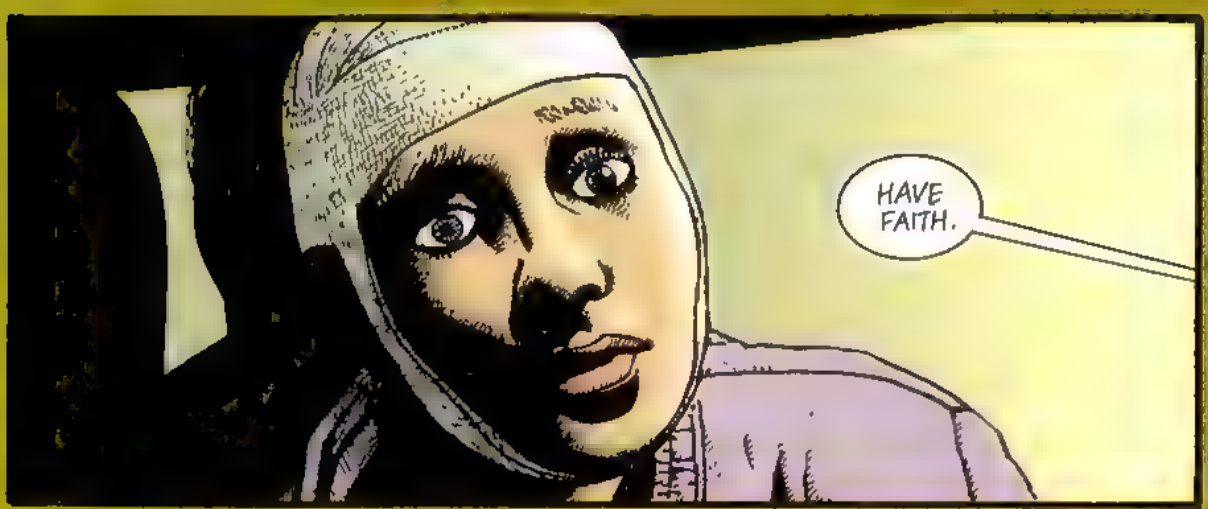
WHAT ABOUT THE RISKS IF WE DON'T DO IT, MAYOR?
ALL OF YOU KNOW THAT WE COULD VERY WELL FIND A WEAPON OUT THERE STRONG ENOUGH TO KILL THIS CREATURE.

SISTER, SISTER, CALM YOURSELF.
AFTER ALL, THIS TROUBLE SHALL WORK ITSELF OUT TOMORROW, WHEN THE SALVAGE REFERENDUM COMES UP FOR A VOTE.


RIGHT! NOW THAT YOU'VE GOT THIS CITY ALL SCARED SHITLESS WITH YOUR END-OF-THE-WORLD TALK AND YOUR MONSTER, NOW YOU'LL LET THEM VOTE.
I?! I AM RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS?!

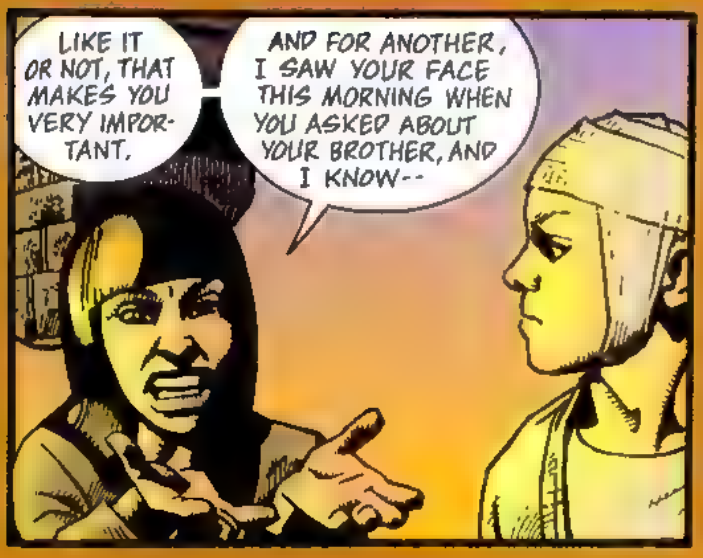

YOU TEST MY SERENITY, SISTER.
I WILL NOT STAY FOR SUCH WORDS.
LEGATE, WAIT!


MY BROTHER, TOCH NEWCOMEN. I HAVEN'T SEEN HIM FOR WEEKS.
IS HE ALL RIGHT?! CAN I TALK TO HIM?!
HE IS IN SECLUSION AT THE REFUGE, PRAYING IN PREPARATION FOR THE EXTINCTION.
FIRSTFATHER WATCHES OVER HIM SISTER RACHEL. WORRY NOT.


HAVE FAITH.

"HAVE FAITH."
THAT'S HIS ANSWER TO ALL OUR PROBLEMS.

IT MAKES THINGS SEEM A LOT SIMPLER, I SUPPOSE.
THING IS, THE PROBLEMS NEVER GET SOLVED, DO THEY?
MS. KARTHA, I'M NOT SURE WHY YOU ASKED ME OUT HERE.
WELL, SERGEANT NEWCOMEN, FOR ONE THING, YOU'RE THE RANKING LAW OFFICER IN EMERSON NOW.


LIKE IT OR NOT, THAT MAKES YOU VERY IMPORTANT.
AND FOR ANOTHER, I SAW YOUR FACE THIS MORNING WHEN YOU ASKED ABOUT YOUR BROTHER, AND I KNOW--

--YOU DON'T HAVE FAITH.

AND YOU SHOULDN'T. I KNEW CARSON MUIR WHEN I WAS A LITTLE GIRL.
I SAW SOME OF THE THINGS HE DID.
I HEARD ABOUT THE OTHERS.

ALL HIS HOLY TALK JUST DOESN'T RING TRUE FOR ME--OR YOU, I THINK.
I CAN'T SAY HE'S MY FAVORITE PERSON, BUT HE MADE SOME POINTS TODAY I FOUND DIFFICULT TO IGNORE.

SERGEANT, SEVENTY YEARS AGO MY GRANDFATHER STARTED MINING AND SMELTING ORE.
BACK THEN, A LOT OF PEOPLE DIDN'T LIKE THE SOUNDS OF THAT EITHER--UNTIL THEY STARTED USING STEEL PLOW SHARES AND THRESHERS.

WHAT I'M SAYING IS, I LIVE IN EMERSON, TOO. SO DO MY CHILDREN.
I WANT TO DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR THIS CITY, AND THAT'S WHY I WANT THIS CREATURE DESTROYED.

"NOW LISTEN. THE SHIP, THE ONE MUIR CALLS THE *ARK*--"

I'M SORRY, SISTER, BUT LEGATE MUIR IS NOT HERE TO RECEIVE YOU.

"--WELL, I KNOW THE SALVAGE REFERENDUM WILL BE DEFEATED, BUT SERGEANT, THERE ARE THINGS ON THAT SHIP."

GOOD. I DIDN'T WANT TO RUN INTO HIM ANYWAY.

"THINGS, MY GRANDFATHER SAID, WE CAN'T EVEN IMAGINE.

"I'M CERTAIN THE MEANS TO KILL THIS PREDATOR CAN BE FOUND THERE."

PLEASE, SISTER. THE OTHERS ARE IN SECLUSION. YOU SHOULDN'T BE HERE.

"IT'S JUST TWO DAYS-JOURNEY FROM EMERSON, BUT *ONLY* MUIR HAS A MAP TO IT.

"WE NEED THAT MAP, AND UNLESS I MISS MY GUESS, MUIR KEEPS IT IN *FIRST-FATHER'S* 'CHAMBERS,' SO CALLED."

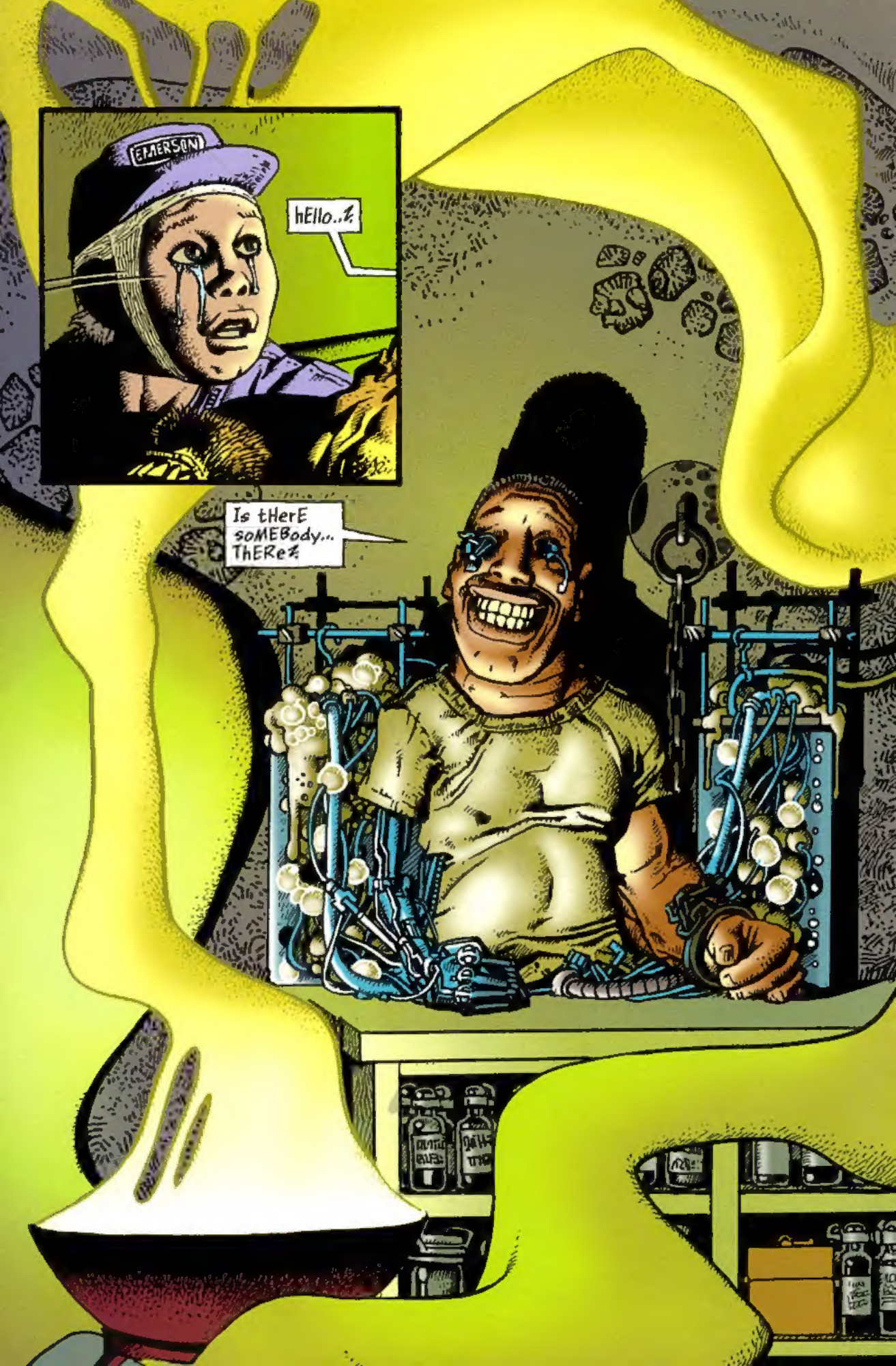
"WHY ARE YOU TELLING ME ALL THIS, MS. KARTHA?

"WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I'LL HELP YOU?"

"YOU'VE SEEN THAT THING, SERGEANT.
"I'M COUNTING ON YOU WANTING IT DEAD MORE THAN ANY OF US.

"AND--
"--THERE IS THE MATTER OF YOUR BROTHER."
TOCH!

NO, NO, NO! NOT MY LITTLE BROTHER--
TOCH, WHAT DID THEY DO TO YOUZ!


EMERSON
hEllo..?
Is tHerE
soMEBody...
ThERe?